

Coaching as a Key Component in Teachers' Professional Development

Improving Classroom Practices in Head Start Settings

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Overview

Head Start CARES (Classroom-based Approaches and Resources for Emotion and Social Skill Promotion) is a large-scale, national research demonstration that was designed to test the effects of a one-year program aimed at improving pre-kindergarteners' social and emotional readiness for school. To facilitate the delivery of the program, teachers attended training workshops and worked with coaches throughout the school year.

This report focuses on the planning and implementation of the coaching component in the Head Start CARES demonstration. Beginning with an overview of coaching as a model of professional development generally and the demonstration's coaching model in particular, the report then offers practical lessons learned about coaching social-emotional curricula in a large and complex early childhood education system.

Geared toward early childhood education administrators and practitioners who are interested in adopting or modifying a coaching model, the lessons learned address the selection of the coaching model; coach hiring and training; coaching processes; coach support and supervision; and program management, data, and quality assurance.

Key Findings

- When selecting a coaching model, administrators need to carefully consider the variety of models that are available and choose the model that best suits their particular context.
- Communication about the coaching model and the coaching goals and objectives should include everyone who is involved in the coaching process.
- Successful coaches exhibited a combination of skills in three important areas: knowledge of the program, general coaching and consultation skills, and knowledge of and experience in early childhood development and/or teaching.
- Successful implementation of the coaching model necessitates taking sufficient time to locate skilled coaches, providing support in multiple areas, and training coaches in advance of their work with teachers.
- Teachers need time and privacy in order to reflect on implementation processes with coaches.
- Incorporating coaching into day-to-day practices requires flexibility and is necessary for implementation success.
- Site-level administrators must be actively engaged in supporting and supervising coaching as well as general implementation processes.
- Building an infrastructure that allows for continuous quality assurance and monitoring of the coaching model is essential for high-quality program management.

These lessons constitute a first step toward defining a set of core principles regarding coaching implementation in early childhood education settings. More in-depth findings on coaching, professional development, and the study more generally will be offered in forthcoming reports.

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Introduction

Research has shown that well-designed professional development is central to enhancing teachers' skills, and when children are supported by skilled teachers, their achievement levels improve.¹ Interest in professional development in early childhood education programs, therefore, is rapidly increasing, especially with regard to coaching, for teachers — which provides ongoing training, classroom consultation, and other supports.² At the same time, little empirical evidence exists on best practices in this field. What is clear is that coaching offers the opportunity to improve the classroom experiences of children through strengthening teachers' skills.³

This report focuses on the planning and implementation of coaching in Head Start CARES (Classroom-based Approaches and Resources for Emotion and Social Skill Promotion), an early childhood education (preschool) research demonstration that operated in Head Start centers across the country.⁴ Head Start, the largest federally funded early childhood education program in the United States, provides comprehensive services to low-income children and their families. MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization, coordinated the demonstration and provided technical assistance for implementation. This report is geared toward early childhood education administrators and others who are interested in bringing coaching to scale in preschool sites. It begins with a brief overview of the role of coaching in early childhood education, the Head Start CARES demonstration project, and the model of coaching used in the demonstration. Next, operational lessons learned about coaching from the Head Start CARES demonstration are presented. The lessons draw upon perceptions of Head Start CARES coaches, teachers, site-level administrators, center-level administrators and directors, and the MDRC technical assistance team. Interviews with these key players, survey data provided by the coaches, and technical assistance interactions throughout the demonstration inform these lessons.

As highlighted in this report, coaching represents a departure from the typical way of doing business in early childhood education programs. It cannot simply be tacked onto an existing system of service delivery. Adoption of coaching as a form of professional development is a complex endeavor that requires careful planning, systemwide changes, and ongoing support and review.

¹Howes (1997).

²“Consultation” and “coaching” are used interchangeably in the early childhood education literature. In this report, the term “coaching” is used exclusively.

³Hsieh, Hemmeter, McCollum and Ostrosky (2009); Landry, Anthony, Swank, and Monseque-Bailey (2009); Lloyd and Bangser (2009); Mashburn et al. (2008).

⁴More in-depth findings covering the implementation and impacts of the Head Start CARES demonstration will be offered in future reports.

Early Childhood Settings, Coaching, and Teacher Quality

High-quality pre-kindergarten (pre-K) classroom instruction has been associated with improvements in school readiness,⁵ and research examining methods of improving instructional quality and child outcomes for both pre-K and older students is expanding across the United States.⁶ Evidence on this topic illustrates that improving classroom quality is not easy. It requires teachers who are skilled at providing safe, caring, and supportive environments and who have knowledge of developmentally appropriate classroom practices that allow for active engagement and learning across multiple domains. Unfortunately, in preschools serving impoverished communities, there is often a mismatch between teachers' preparation and the skills that are needed to optimize classroom practices.⁷

Recent attention to this issue has led to an increase in professional development initiatives geared toward improving the interactions and instructional practices of early childhood teachers. For example, the Administration for Children and Families recently awarded grants to Head Start centers aimed at improving the quality of teaching and the experiences of children in these settings.⁸ This effort and many other current initiatives focus on supporting a particular form of professional development — classroom coaching.⁹

The educational professional development literature has defined several models of coaching.¹⁰ One study makes a distinction between "individual-level consultation," which focuses on direct services to a child or family, and "program-level consultation," which, as described above, provides training, classroom consultation, and other supports to capitalize on and strengthen the skills of individuals who are involved in the development of children, including administrators and teachers.¹¹ In addition, coaching can focus on process-oriented tasks like screening and assessment of children or it can focus on supporting a particular initiative — for example, a framework for classroom operations or a specific curriculum. In general, a coach provides consistent, ongoing support to teachers, administrators, families, and/or children in order to strengthen early childhood practices.

⁵Howes (1997); Landry et al. (2006).

⁶Landry, Anthony, Swank, and Monseque-Bailey (2009); Pianta et al. (2008); Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, and Knoche (2009).

⁷Glazerman and Max (2011); Landry, Anthony, Swank, and Monseque-Bailey (2009).

⁸For more information on these grants, see www.grants.gov/search/search.do?mode=VIEW&oppId=54872.

⁹For studies of other efforts to improve the quality of teaching and the experiences of children in these settings, see, for example, Brennan, Bradley, Allen, and Perry (2008); Buysse and Wesley (2005); Green, Everhart, Gordon, and Gettman (2006).

¹⁰For a comprehensive review, see Isner et al. (2011).

¹¹Cohen and Kaufmann (2000).

Despite the variation in coaching models, common features exist. Program-level models that focus on changing teachers' behavior include the following steps: (1) building relationships with teachers; (2) observing, modeling, and advising in the classroom; (3) meeting with teachers to discuss classroom practices, provide support and feedback, and assist with problem-solving for classroom challenges; and (4) monitoring progress toward identified goals. This form of professional development differs from typical early childhood education professional development, which generally consists of "one-shot" activities — like workshops — that do not allow for breadth or depth of exploration on a particular topic.¹² In fact, prior studies indicate that training alone is not enough to improve teacher skill over time.¹³ Teachers need well-designed, focused training supplemented with ongoing coaching to improve skills acquisition and to better transfer what they have learned to their work with children.¹⁴ Perhaps most important, teachers are more likely to follow through and consistently apply the skills they have learned when they have continued support.¹⁵

The Head Start CARES Demonstration and Its Coaching Model

This report uses information emerging from the Head Start CARES demonstration to highlight early lessons regarding coaching practice. The Head Start CARES demonstration is a large-scale national research study designed to test the effects of programs to enhance social-emotional development in Head Start settings over the course of one academic year.¹⁶ The demonstration referred to these programs as "enhancements" because they were intended to enrich and complement classroom practices that already existed. The demonstration used a lottery-like process to randomly assign 104 Head Start centers within 17 sites across the country to one of three different social-emotional models or a "business as usual" comparison group.¹⁷ Lead teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) in the program centers were trained and coached in one of three social-emotional enhancements, shown in Table 1: Incredible Years,¹⁸ Preschool PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies), or Tools of the Mind, all of which have

¹²Garet et al. (2001); Lloyd and Bangser (2009).

¹³Joyce and Showers (2002); Raver et al. (2008).

¹⁴Joyce and Showers (2002); Raver et al. (2008); Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, and Knoche (2009).

¹⁵Lloyd and Bangser (2009); Raver et al. (2008).

¹⁶The Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) defines social-emotional development as the developing capacity of the child from birth through five years of age to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn — all in the context of family, community, and culture.

¹⁷Four sites participated during the 2009-2010 school year, and 13 sites participated during the 2010-2011 school year. The intervention was conducted for one year only in each site.

¹⁸The Teacher Classroom Management Program, one of three Incredible Years programs, was studied in Head Start CARES.

Head Start CARES Demonstration

Table 1

Head Start CARES Enhancements

Enhancement	Description	Primary Components	In Practice
Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Program	Promotes positive teacher/child relationships, evidence-based classroom management and coaching strategies, and teacher/parent partnerships	Positive attention, coaching methods, proactive discipline, and other behavior supports; structured behavior management plans; relationship building and parent involvement	Emotion coaching: “I can see you are frustrated with having to wait so long for the computer, but you are really being patient and staying calm.”
Preschool PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies)	Enhances social-emotional development through explicit lessons and a set of generalized teaching strategies	Daily exchange of compliments; weekly lessons that promote emotional knowledge, vocabulary describing feelings, self-regulation, positive peer relations, and problem-solving	“How do you think _____ felt when _____ gave him a hug? That’s right, he felt happy! How do you look when you feel happy? What makes you feel happy?”
Tools of the Mind	Focuses on mature make-believe play and specific learning activities to foster cognitive, self-regulation, and executive function skills	Make-believe play planning, make-believe play, and make-believe play practice	Sample child play plan: “I am going to be the bus driver.” Teacher supporting play: “What route will your bus take?”

been subject to smaller-scale randomized control trials and have evidence of efficacy with low-income preschool children.¹⁹

The Head Start CARES demonstration is the first simultaneous test of all three models in a large-scale context: 3,927 selected students were observed in 307 classrooms across the participating Head Start centers.²⁰ In order to fully support the delivery of the program models, each Head Start teacher in the intervention classrooms received training and coaching in one of the enhancements. Training workshops were delivered throughout the school year by enhance-

¹⁹Domitrovich, Cortes, and Greenberg (2007); Barnett et al. (2008); Webster-Stratton, Reid, and Hammond (2004).

²⁰This includes students and classrooms that received the intervention as well as those that did not. Each classroom had two or three teachers — for example, one lead teacher and one TA, or one lead and two TAs, or two leads and one TA.

ment trainers. Fifty-two coaches — who received specific training in coaching and attended the enhancement training workshops with the teachers — worked with the teachers to help them integrate the new content in their classrooms. On average, each coach worked with four classrooms, typically comprising, at a minimum, one lead teacher and one TA. In addition to working with the Head Start teachers, these coaches worked with a number of other individuals, including those who developed the enhancements (“enhancement developers”), enhancement trainers, site-level administrators, center-level administrators and directors, and the MDRC technical assistance team. The responsibilities of these key players in the demonstration are described in Table 2.

Head Start sites that participated in the Head Start CARES demonstration were spread across the United States. These sites differed in size, structure, organizational capacity, and access to resources. Given that enhancement developers did not have the resources to allocate their trainers across multiple centers, coaching in Head Start CARES was conceptualized as a necessity for scale-up and as a way to augment and reinforce the training content.

The Coaching Model

Although two of the three enhancements had specific coaching models of their own prior to Head Start CARES, the MDRC research team created one standard coaching model that was used across all enhancements for replication and scale-up purposes. The model was conceptualized as a way to standardize coaching processes and was viewed as an essential component of the professional development effort for all three enhancements. It included five key elements:

- **Teacher-focused.** Coaches were expected to support teachers directly rather than focus on the students in the classroom.
- **Collaborative.** Coaches were to consider implementation of the enhancements as a joint project between themselves and teachers, where both were equal contributors with different areas of expertise.
- **Instructional.** Coaches were expected to facilitate ongoing teacher learning and implementation of program enhancements.
- **Evaluative.** Coaches were expected to provide constructive and critical feedback on teachers’ performance in the classroom.
- **Nonsupervisory.** Coaches did not have the power to make or influence decisions about teachers’ performance as it related to their employment status or compensation.

Head Start CARES Demonstration

Table 2

Title, Responsibilities, Employment, and Supervision of Key Players in Head Start CARES

Title	Responsibilities in Head Start CARES	Employment and Supervision
Coach	<p>Attended training sessions with teachers.</p> <p>Received ongoing content-related support from trainer and enhancement developer.</p> <p>Observed and met with teachers weekly to discuss enhancement implementation.</p>	<p>Employed by site-level administrators and center-level administrators and directors.</p> <p>Supervised by the enhancement developer/trainer, site-level administrators, and center-level administrators and directors.</p>
Trainer	<p>Delivered training sessions to coaches and teachers on enhancement content.</p> <p>Visited classrooms to support coaches and teachers with enhancement implementation.</p> <p>Provided supervision and regular feedback on coach performance.</p>	Employed and supervised by the enhancement developer.
Enhancement developer	Developed the enhancement.	Various employment and supervision structures (e.g., universities, research centers).
Site-level administrators and center-level administrators and directors	<p>Recruited, hired, and supervised coaches.</p> <p>Monitored implementation throughout the year.</p>	Employed and supervised by other senior administrative staff.
Lead teachers and teaching assistants	<p>Attended training sessions alongside the coach.</p> <p>Received ongoing support from coaches and trainers throughout the year.</p> <p>Implemented assigned enhancement in the classroom.</p>	Employed and supervised by site-level administrators and center-level administrators and directors.
MDRC technical assistance team	Provided ongoing technical assistance to site-level administrators, center-level administrators and directors, enhancement developers, trainers, and coaches throughout the year (e.g., monitored log completion, facilitated communication between trainer and site-level administrators).	Awarded a grant by the Administration for Children and Families to implement and evaluate Head Start CARES.

NOTE: “Teachers” include lead teachers and teaching assistants (TAs).

Lessons Learned

The lessons that are presented below are based on the Head Start CARES program-focused coaching model and draw from a variety of data sources. To gain an understanding of how the coaching was implemented, the MDRC research team conducted close to 300 interviews with program administrators and staff, Head Start teachers, enhancement developers and trainers, and Head Start CARES coaches. Additional sources of information included (1) several types of survey data that coaches provided (described in more detail later); (2) data from regularly scheduled calls and other interactions between coaches and key Head Start CARES personnel that occurred throughout the year; and (3) a demographic survey about the coaches' qualifications and background.

Salient themes that emerged from interviews, survey data, and technical assistance interactions with key players drive the lessons presented below and offer the evaluation team's assessment of what was helpful in successfully implementing coaching in Head Start CARES. The application of the lessons that follow appeared to increase teachers' and coaches' ability to adhere closely to the program model within the context of replication and scaling up, and it is expected that these lessons will also be useful for others who are implementing coaching models in complex early childhood settings.

Lesson 1: Selection of the Coaching Model and Objectives

- **Administrators need to carefully consider the variety of coaching models that are available and choose one that best suits their particular context.**
- **Communication about the coaching model and objectives needs to occur with everyone who is involved in the coaching process.**

Designing and delivering an effective early childhood education coaching program depends in part on making sure that the objectives of the coaching model and coach responsibilities are clear. As articulated previously, coaching models vary in focus, content, and specificity. Coaches and teachers reported that they preferred structured coaching sessions with a clear focus. This suggests that coaching models should reflect a specific approach or curriculum rather than being open-ended. Administrators would benefit if they were armed with knowledge about the coaching model they might use and the desired outcomes. For example, they need to consider whether coaches will be tasked with supporting and promoting language, literacy, mathematics, social skills, self-regulation, or some other aspect of development.

Coaching models vary in terms of the skills and knowledge that teachers need to build upon. Given the differences, administrators might ask these questions: What prior skills and knowledge, if any, should teachers have in order to fully benefit from a particular coaching

model? What is the coach's role with teachers — support, modeling, supervision, evaluation? What are the desired outcomes of the coaching intervention and how will outcomes be evaluated? These are just a few of the questions that need to be systematically addressed before a coaching model is implemented.

Attention to these issues is the first step. The second step is ensuring that everyone who is involved in the coaching process — coaches, teachers, and other center-based staff — agree about what should come out of the coaching process. This ensures that coaches know what to do and teachers and administrators know what to expect.

The coaching goal in Head Start CARES was to support implementation of the program enhancements with fidelity. The coach role was defined both in terms of expectations for the coach's performance and clarity around the coach's role with teachers and administrators. An awareness of the coach's role helped to focus the coaching agenda in useful ways. For example, as described earlier, the Head Start CARES model stipulated that coaches were in nonsupervisory roles. Both teachers and coaches indicated that this stipulation helped foster positive relationships between them, allowing teachers to open up and share when they were having difficulty implementing an enhancement without fearing that their employment evaluations or status would be jeopardized. At the same time, to the extent that some teachers were recalcitrant or resistant and uninterested in implementing the enhancements, the coaches' nonsupervisory status made it more difficult to implement the model successfully.

In short, several issues need to be considered systematically and resolved before implementing a coaching component in an early childhood education program. Additionally, everyone involved in the coaching process should be clear about their objectives, be thoughtful about the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches, and be prepared to address them.

Lesson 2: Coach Hiring and Training

- Successful coaches exhibited a combination of skills in three important areas: knowledge of the enhancement being coached, general coaching and consultation skills, and knowledge of and experience in early childhood development and/or teaching.²¹**

²¹Trainers and the MDRC technical assistance team defined successful coaches as those who helped teachers to implement the model with fidelity, provided feedback using notes or data, helped teachers problem-solve and plan for classroom activities, ably demonstrated program techniques, answered teachers' questions about the program, provided emotional support for and motivated teachers, and conducted themselves in a professional manner.

- **Successful implementation of the coaching model necessitates taking sufficient time to locate skilled coaches, providing support in multiple areas, and providing full training to coaches well in advance of their work with teachers.²²**

Having a coach who is a good fit for the specific site and enhancement is paramount to supporting teachers' implementation of the enhancement. For example, a coach who is a poor fit might not subscribe to the enhancement strategies and may be less likely to support strong implementation of that content. In Head Start CARES, MDRC helped site-level administrators with hiring by providing a list of abilities and qualifications that coaches should possess, as well as sample interview questions and practice scenarios to facilitate in-depth and careful screening of candidates (shown in Table 3). These "on-the-ground" scenarios allowed administrators to assess the candidate's problem-solving skills and provided a concrete measure of whether or not the individual might be well suited for a coaching position. Administrators were also asked to consider the candidate's educational background and knowledge of the enhancement. Finally, administrators were charged not only to consider academic qualifications, but also to think hard about skills that are difficult to assess, such as relationship-building skills, ability to negotiate challenging situations, and sound judgment. Compensation for these skills was ultimately determined by local pay scales and center- and site-level administrator decisions; however, the MDRC technical assistance team recommended that coaches be paid \$25 an hour.

Box 1 describes a "typical" Head Start CARES coach. In general, coaches who were proactive and created and maintained lines of communication among all teachers, administrators, and other key parties reported that they were more likely to make strong connections with teachers and feel comfortable providing the feedback that is necessary for teachers to improve their practices. They also had the capacity to navigate the many systems involved in the study (such as interactions with teachers, other center-level personnel, and the research and technical assistance team) without feeling overwhelmed. Competencies in these areas were also important because coaching in the context of Head Start CARES required not only having enhancement-specific, content-focused knowledge, but the ability to engage teachers (which required learning the generalized coaching process), as well as knowledge of and experience in early childhood development and/or teaching practice.

²²The coaching model was implemented successfully when skilled coaches gathered information about implementation of the program model from weekly classroom observations and conducted weekly coaching sessions that set goals for teachers' implementation, reviewed teachers' progress toward those goals, addressed implementation challenges, and made plans for future observations and meetings.

Head Start CARES Demonstration

Table 3

Head Start CARES Sample Coach Hiring Interview

Interview Topics	Sample Questions	What to Look For
Applicant's background	<p>1. Tell us about your knowledge of or experience working with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preschool-age children • Social-emotional curricula and teaching practices • Training, coaching, supporting, or mentoring teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early childhood experience • Teaching experience • Adult education experience • Coaching experience • Educational background (e.g., early childhood studies)
Applicant's reflections on preschool children's social-emotional development and behavior	<p>1. Why might a preschooler:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave group time before the activity is over? • Not follow directions? <p>2. If you were a coach, what would you suggest a teacher do to address the behaviors listed above?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insightful perspectives on challenging behaviors that demonstrate awareness of early childhood development • Concrete, appropriate suggestions a teacher could use to address the behaviors
Applicant's reflections on being a coach	<p>1. How do you define "coach"?</p> <p>2. How will you build trust and rapport with your teachers?</p> <p>3. How will you determine whether you are effective in supporting the teacher?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A coaching philosophy that matches the philosophy of the enhancement model and site • Concrete suggestions to build trust and rapport (e.g., consistency in visits, notes of encouragement, working with children in the classroom) • An applicant who values, measures, and acts upon self-reflections of coaching effectiveness
Role plays	<p>1. If you were a coach, how would you address the following issues?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A teacher is not implementing any enhancement strategies. • A teacher is quiet, reticent, or defensive. • A teacher tells you, "John is mean, aggressive, and selfish. No one wants to play with him. Other parents are complaining about him." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritization of goal-setting with teachers (concrete, measurable goals that are discussed regularly) • Thoughtful, strategic ability to navigate challenging situations • Balance between providing positive reinforcement and clear, critical feedback to teachers
Final comments	<p>1. Will your schedule accommodate visits to classrooms at various times throughout the week and at the end of the school day?</p> <p>2. Do you have reliable access to a computer and are you comfortable using the Internet and a word processor?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A flexible schedule that allows for multiple classroom observations at varying times of day • Comfort with and consistent use of technology • Ability to communicate clearly in writing

Box 1**A Typical Head Start CARES Coach**

The typical Head Start CARES coach was female, 46 years of age, and white. Coaches were not generally part of the Head Start system prior to the Head Start CARES demonstration project. They were both full- and part-time employees, and worked with a range of classrooms (two to thirteen) based on their employment status and availability. A typical coach had a master's degree in early childhood education, a minimum of 11 years of experience in early childhood settings, one to four years of experience in adult education, and minimal experience coaching teachers in a social-emotional enhancement.

Because of the range of skills and abilities described above, it was often difficult to locate coaches who were deemed appropriate for the work. In particular, it proved challenging to hire coaches who had knowledge of a language other than English. If a language other than English was spoken in the classroom, coaches who did not speak that language were at a clear disadvantage in terms of being able to provide feedback about the enhancement implementation and teachers' progress.

In Head Start CARES, enhancement developers relied on Head Start sites to conduct the search for coaches and facilitate their subsequent hiring, much as they would in real-world settings. However, in a nonresearch context, developers would normally play a more hands-on role in coach selection. For example, developers might have worked with site- or center-level administrators to identify promising coach candidates. The research and technical assistance team's experiences suggest that the recruitment and hiring process should begin at least two months before the start of the school year, take into account language, and include regular and ongoing collaboration between the hiring agency and those responsible for developing the coaching model about potential hires.

As an artifact of the evaluation and its timeframes, coaches received minimal advanced training in the content of their respective enhancements or the coaching role before Head Start CARES began. This meant that they were equipped with only cursory knowledge of their enhancements and had varying experience with coaching processes before initiating work with teachers. In a nonresearch context, developers would prefer to train coaches in the enhancement before the start of the school year.

The core training for Head Start CARES coaches included a two-day advanced training in general coaching strategies, coupled with a preliminary overview of enhancement-specific content. Hires also received general training in the Head Start CARES management information

system, or MIS (described in more detail later) and in enhancement-related documentation, including how to adequately assess fidelity of implementation.

In addition, during the academic year, coaches attended ongoing training sessions alongside the teachers they coached in order to learn the full repertoire of the enhancement content. They also met with enhancement trainers throughout the year to continually refine their enhancement knowledge base. While the ongoing training and support were deemed valuable, it became evident that coaches believed that receiving the full enhancement training in advance of their work with teachers would have been the best way to help them support the implementation of the program.

Lesson 3: Coaching Processes

- **Teachers need time and privacy to reflect on implementation processes with coaches.**
- **Embedding coaching into day-to-day practices requires flexibility and is necessary for implementation of the coaching model as intended.**

Coaches in Head Start CARES were expected to observe classrooms once a week for an hour at a time and to meet with teachers to debrief and reflect on their observations for 30 minutes each week. Although specific guidance was given on the amount of time coaches were to spend working with and meeting with teachers, the coaching sessions in Head Start CARES varied widely from classroom to classroom. Some coaches managed to have regularly scheduled structured meetings that both lead teachers and TAs attended, while others had difficulty scheduling joint meetings and were generally unable to have consistent sit-down sessions. These issues became even more complicated in part-day programs or in programs with multiple sessions per day.

Coaches believed that teachers' mastery of new skills required not only opportunities to practice, but time to think through how and why a new skill was useful, and how best to integrate it into their existing instructional practices. Teachers and coaches perceived meetings as most effective when knowledge transfer occurred in private, quiet areas, away from children and the classroom, and coaches and teachers (both lead and TA) were provided an opportunity for reflection, praise, critical feedback, and skill-building. Sites that were successful in facilitating interactions like this did so in a variety of ways, including having center directors or "floating" teachers cover classrooms during teacher-coach meetings, or setting aside specific paid planning periods for this work to occur.

In addition, coaches can support teachers by visiting classrooms on different days and times. This structure provides an opportunity to observe variation in classroom practices and for

coaches to actively model and engage with teachers on different skills and tasks. Coach case-loads (that is, the number and locations of classrooms they are responsible for coaching) must be considered so that coaches have the flexibility to vary their schedules.

Lesson 4: Coach Support and Supervision

- **Site-level administrators must be actively engaged in supporting and supervising coaching as well as general implementation processes.**

Given the research context of the Head Start CARES project, MDRC took on a substantial technical assistance role, which included taking the lead in partnering with sites and enhancement developers to monitor enhancement implementation. Outside the research context, program administrators need supervisory and/or leadership staff to serve in this capacity. A number of individuals could serve in this role, including site-level administrators and center-level administrators and directors.

Even outside the research process, it was critical to have individuals involved in supporting implementation who had the power to move the process forward and who also had the time to appropriately manage and supervise coaches and teachers. In many cases, coaches and trainers helped to bring about major shifts in the culture of the implementing classrooms and were engaged in efforts that challenged teachers' thoughts about their work and responsibilities. This culture shift meant that administrators had to understand several issues — for instance, what coaches do on a day-to-day basis and how to supervise them; what elements of the enhancements are necessary for fidelity of implementation to the coaching content and model, including what could be negotiated, adapted, or changed; and what other curricula or initiatives in centers/classrooms might conflict with or distract from implementation of the coaching model.

To facilitate this understanding, structured opportunities for administrators need to be created. Such opportunities include time for administrators to learn about the coaching models to ensure that they can be concrete about the requirements for program start-up and are able to set clear expectations about the level of support the model needs throughout the year. Administrators also need to appoint someone to distribute the fiscal and concrete resources (like enhancement manuals, teaching props, and so forth) that are necessary to implement the enhancements; sending clear, positive messages about implementation adherence to teachers and other educational staff who are integral to center- and classroom-level operations; and providing a place where coaches can go within the administrative structure when they need specific help and support.

Lesson 5: Program Management, Data, and Quality Assurance

- **Building an infrastructure that allows for continuous quality assurance and monitoring of the coaching model is essential for high-quality program management.**

The Head Start CARES project collected a significant amount of data on implementation processes. A large percentage of this information was accumulated in a management information system that provided a simple, common framework for coaches and trainers to submit data. The system comprised user-friendly, online surveys and was designed to support the technical assistance, management, and fidelity monitoring of the enhancements.

The MIS accumulated information from coaches in a few key areas, as shown in Table 4. Coaches submitted a one-time “Summer Checklist” at the start of the year to document planning efforts that they had undertaken before the school year began: whether they had been able to schedule a regular coaching time with teachers, whether they had met with their site administrators, and whether they had been in touch with their trainers. Throughout the year, coaches submitted a weekly “Coaching Log” for each classroom to document whether they were able to observe or coach teachers that week, the length of the observation and coaching sessions, the strategies used during the coaching session, and the productivity of the session. Each month, coaches submitted “Fidelity Reports” for each classroom. Coaches considered the level of implementation in each classroom, whether teachers and teaching assistants were working together to implement the enhancement, the type of organizational support they were receiving, and the teachers’ openness to the coaching process. At the end of the year, coaches completed an “End-of-Year Reflections” document in which they reflected on their own level of buy-in to the enhancements, the issues they encountered most frequently throughout the year, and the type of support they received from site- or center-level administrators and their trainer.

Each day, the MIS converted the surveys into a spreadsheet format that made it possible for key stakeholders to quickly identify teachers, classrooms, and/or sites who were struggling with meeting implementation fidelity standards. For example, the Summer Checklist revealed whether or not coaches had gained access to their sites and were communicating with key personnel before the start of the year. The Coaching Log identified coaches who were not able to observe classrooms or meet with teaching teams, as prescribed by the coaching model. The Fidelity Report identified teachers who were having challenges with implementation. The End-of-Year Reflections shed light on the key implementation concerns that coaches had throughout the year. When problems persisted, MIS data provided detailed and concrete feedback to facilitate conversations and develop action plans for addressing the challenges. For example, if a weekly Coaching Log indicated that coaching sessions were not taking place in a particular classroom, administrators could make a focused effort to free up teacher schedules.

Head Start CARES

Table 4

Information Collected in the Head Start CARES Management Information System

Log Type	Frequency of Submission	Information Captured	Sample Question(s)
Summer Checklist	One time	Pre-school year planning efforts	Did you set up a meeting with site-level administrators, center-level administrators and directors, and trainers to crosswalk the program curriculum with the site's curriculum and any special center requirements?
Coaching Log	Weekly, per classroom	Amount of time spent meeting and observing teachers, strategies used during the coaching session, coach assessments of the productivity of the session	Was the lead teacher present for this session? Was the teaching assistant (TA) present for this session?
Fidelity Report	Monthly, per classroom	Assessment of fidelity of program implementation, teacher-TA relationships, coach-teacher relationships, and organizational support	It is clear when you enter this classroom and look around that it is a(n) [type of enhancement] classroom. (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)
End-of-Year Reflections	One time	Coach buy-in to the enhancement, major issues encountered throughout the year, reflections on support received by site administrators/trainer	What did you find to be the single biggest challenge to classroom implementation this year?

This type of infrastructure is rarely available in early childhood education settings;²³ however, based on the Head Start CARES experience, there appears to be great value in developing a system that enables managers to think about individual and collective implementation weaknesses and strengths, and to take the information into account to improve classroom practices. These evaluative processes can allow site- and center-level administrators and center-level directors to understand the skill level of those being assessed. At the same time, attention must

²³Wesley and Buysse (2004).

also be given to understanding how this process may or may not affect the confidentiality and security of the coach-teacher relationship.

Conclusion

Coaching as a form of professional development offers the opportunity to greatly influence the quality of experiences that both teachers and children in early childhood education settings receive. Implementation of a strong coaching component, however, is a complicated endeavor that should be undertaken with strategic planning and advisement. Program administrators should carefully think through and resolve multiple factors, including the kind of coaching model they will employ, the type of skills needed by coaches to support the model, the people they will hire, and the best way to support the implementation and sustainability of the model.

The lessons presented here constitute a first step toward articulating a core set of broad principles regarding coaching implementation. As the research base grows and data from this demonstration continue to be analyzed, forthcoming reports will shed even more light on emerging promising practices in this burgeoning field.

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